

Origins of Islam: Abraham and the Ka'bah

Islam is the youngest of the Semitic religions. It was founded by the prophet Muhammad who was born in 570 CE. By 630 CE, Islam was an established faith spreading throughout Arabia. Followers of Islam are called Muslims, which means "one who submits (to) Allah." Allah is the Arabic name for God. Islam means "submission to God." The map on page 94 shows the spread of Islam during Muhammad's lifetime.

The roots of Islam, however, go all the way back to Abraham around 2000 BCE. You may remember Abraham as the father of the Jewish religion. Interestingly, Muslims also regard Abraham as the forefather of their religion.

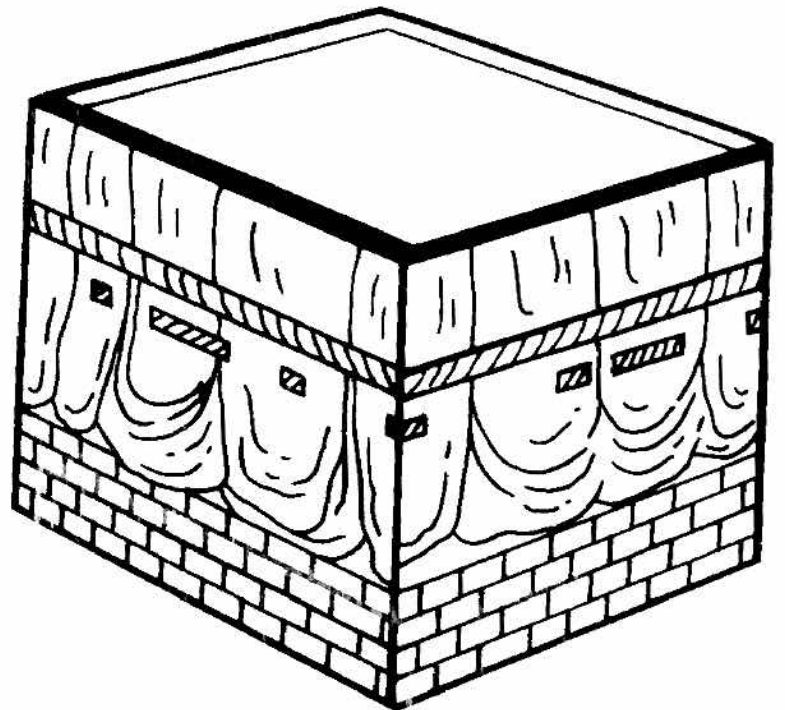
According to both the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) and the Koran (the Islamic holy scripture), Abraham had fathered a son before the birth of Isaac. The boy was Ishmael, whose mother was Abraham's servant, Hagar. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was childless and became jealous. So God told Abraham to bless the child and to send him and his mother south into the desert.

They wandered the desert until they ran out of water. Hagar rested Ishmael on the sand and then searched desperately between two high rocks. She ran back and forth seven times. Finally, resting on one of the rocks, she heard an angel's voice tell her not to be afraid. Miraculously, water spouted from where Ishmael's heels touched the sand. This became the famous well, Zamzam, where the city of Mecca was born.

Toward the end of his life, Abraham traveled into Arabia to visit Ishmael. Muslims believe that God told Abraham to build a holy sanctuary at Zamzam. This site was called the Ka'bah, meaning "cube." It is also known as the House of God. The Ka'bah is about forty feet (12 m) in height, width, and length. The door is seven feet (2.1 m) from the ground and must be entered by a moveable staircase. Curtains and carpets cover most of the outside of the Ka'bah.

Inside the sanctuary are some silver and gold lamps. But the most important object is an oval black stone about seven inches (18 cm) in size. Muslims believe that this stone was given to Abraham by an angel. They say the stone was white but turned black with the kisses of worshippers seeking forgiveness. According to the Koran, God instructed Abraham to tell all worshippers of Allah to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'bah.

As you will see, the Ka'bah plays a central role in the history of Islam. You will learn more about its significance later in this chapter on Islam.



The Life of Muhammad and the Birth of Islam

Early Years

Muhammad ibn Abd Allah, commonly known as Muhammad, was born in the city of Mecca in 570 CE. At the time, Mecca was a busy marketplace crowded with residents and nomads buying and selling goods. Not a great deal is known of Muhammad's early life. Both his mother and father were dead by the time he turned six. He was first cared for by his grandfather, but when he passed away, Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, adopted him. Abu Talib was the head of the Hashim clan, one of many clans making up separate Arabic tribes.

It is believed that as a young adult Muhammad worked as a camel driver. He traveled the Arabian Peninsula with his uncle, making contact with various cultures and religions, including Judaism and Christianity. Because idol worship had come to dominate Mecca, this contact was important. The Ka'bah itself housed many idols, including those representing the three main goddesses.

At the age of twenty-five, Muhammad was working for a widow named Khadijah who was a wealthy merchant. Though he was much younger, she admired his intelligence and maturity so much that she proposed to him. They married, and in the fifteen years which followed, Muhammad lived in affluence. He continued traveling, encountering different faiths and customs.

But riches did not satisfy Muhammad. In Mecca, powerful merchants controlled both the flow of goods and the religious life. As the gap between the rich and the poor widened, Muhammad began to question his life and the world around him.

Muhammad's Revelation

By the time he was forty, Muhammad had begun to spend time in solitude, preoccupied with the questions that troubled him. He spent some nights alone in a small cave near Mecca. During one such night, Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel appeared before him. Gabriel grabbed hold of Muhammad and ordered him to recite some words. He did so, and as he fled the cave in fear, he heard the angel say, "Oh, Muhammad, you are the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel."

At first, Muhammad thought he was going insane. But Khadijah, his wife, believed the vision to be true. And as similar encounters continued, Muhammad slowly began to accept his role as a prophet of God. He started to preach in Mecca, though it took him some time to overcome doubts. But after a few years, he gained conviction that he was one of a lineage of prophets that included Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. According to historians, Muhammad continued to receive revelations for the next twenty years.

Muhammad openly declared that there was only one God. He called on Meccans to reject their idols. Though monotheism was shared by Jews and Christians, its introduction into Mecca troubled the ruling class. As Muhammad's followers increased, so did the unease among his opposition.

The Life of Muhammad and the Birth of Islam

(cont.)

Flight to Medina

Opposition to Muhammad increased. The ruling families insulted him and threatened violence. Soon Muhammad knew that he and his followers must leave Mecca. In 619 CE, they moved for a short while to Ta'if, a nearby town. But they were not allowed to stay, and so they returned to Mecca.

Things got worse for Muhammad when death claimed both his wife, Khadijah, and his uncle, Abu Talib. They had represented support and protection for the young Muslim community. However, it was also during this period, in 619 CE, that Muhammad was believed to have experienced his famous journey to heaven. With Gabriel guiding him, they journeyed first to a rock in Jerusalem, and from there Muhammad rode his faithful horse into heaven. It is claimed that he met other prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Finally, he stood in the presence of Allah.

The course of history changed in 620 CE when some pilgrims from the northern town of Medina came through Mecca. At the time, Medina was being torn apart by the violence of two rival tribes. The pilgrims were moved by Muhammad's teachings and hoped he might settle the raging dispute.

For the next two years, groups of people from Medina came to Mecca and converted to Islam. This inspired Muhammad, who instructed all Muslims to settle in Medina. In 622, Muhammad fled Mecca after hearing of a plot to assassinate him. Legend has it that he and a friend, Abu Bakr, hid in a cave. When his enemies rode by, a giant spider's web covered the mouth of the cave, and seeing the web, they assumed no one could have entered.

From there Muhammad and Abu Bakr traveled safely to Medina. This journey is known as the Hijrah, and it holds special significance to Muslims. Muhammad's arrival into Medina marked the birth of a united Islamic community. The Hijrah signifies the beginning of the Islamic calendar. (See page 117.)

Life in Medina and the Growth of Islam

Muhammad arrived in Medina as the new leader, bearing tremendous responsibilities. While receiving communication from God and teaching his devotees, he had to protect Islam from opposition and find a peaceful solution to the local feuds. Though he was able to unite the feuding clans through his teachings (the Jewish and Muslims prayed together, for example), when Muhammad instructed his followers to pray towards Mecca instead of Jerusalem, tensions grew, and the groups separated completely. Violence erupted, ending in the expulsion of some Jewish tribes from Medina.

With his community established, Muhammad began raiding caravans bound for Mecca. These kinds of raids were not uncommon at the time, and they provided sustenance for the Muslims. This angered the Meccans, and a series of battles followed. Despite a few setbacks, the Muslims gained power and recognition. After destroying or converting his tribal enemies, Muhammad all but controlled the Arabian Peninsula.

Finally, in 629 CE, Mecca submitted to the Muslims. Muhammad entered the city and headed directly to the Ka'bah. After circling it seven times, he smashed the stone idols. He spoke of the oneness of God, or Allah, and proclaimed himself a prophet. From that moment until the present, the Ka'bah became the principal holy place for Muslims.

Muhammad's Last Years

By 630 CE, Islam was the dominant religion in Mecca. Muhammad then set out to conquer the Arabian Peninsula. Some tribes were easily converted while others were met by force. The crusade was successful, and Islam spread to the Arabian Sea to as far north as Syria.

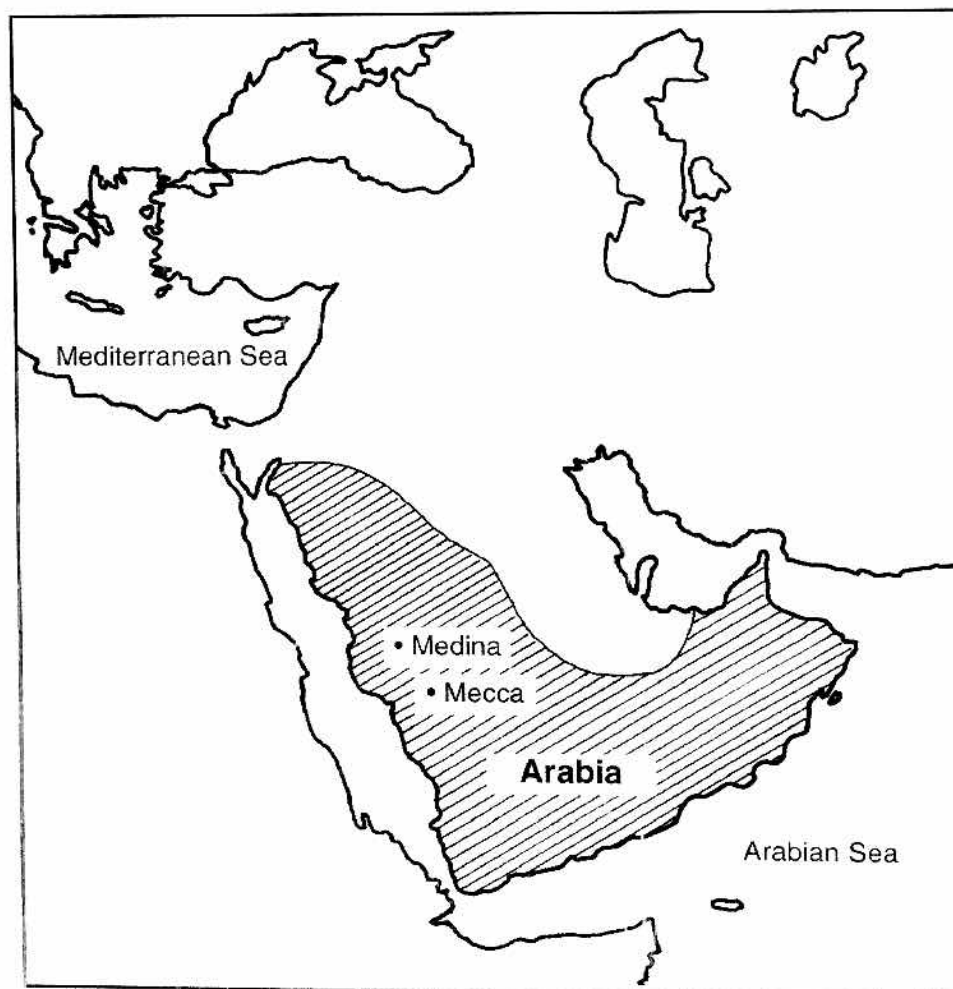
In 632 CE, Muhammad made his last pilgrimage to Mecca. First, he ordered that only Muslims could worship at the Ka'bah. Then, he delivered his last sermon, asking for Islamic unity. He ended with his final revelation from God:

"The unbelievers have this day abandoned all hope of vanquishing your religion. Have no fear of them: fear Me. This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed My favor to you. I have chosen Islam to be your faith."

(Koran 5.3)

On his way back from this pilgrimage, Muhammad fell ill. He died in Medina on June 8, 632 CE, at the age of sixty-one (the 12th day of Rabi I in the Islamic calendar). Although he had married two wives since the death of Khadijah, he had yet to father a son, leaving the question of successor in the hands of his followers.

The Spread of Islam During Muhammad's Lifetime



Name _____

The Life of Muhammad in Review

Respond to the following questions and prompts in complete sentences.

1. Briefly explain the connection between Abraham and Islam.

2. Why was it important that Muhammad traveled a great deal? How did it affect him?

3. Briefly describe Muhammad's first revelation. Can you think of other prophets who had similar experiences?

4. Why was Muhammad disliked in Mecca?

5. Explain the meaning of Hijrah.
